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Barbara Flynn, left, with works by Gary Kuehn, and Gracie Mansion, with a statue by Rodney Alan Greenblat.

Success Stories of Two Galleries In Emerging Art Neighborhoods

By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL

THE two art galleries could hardly be more different: One bustles like a department store, the other is quiet as a library. Visitors flock to one, trickle to the other. The art works in one are thick on the walls and floors, sometimes even stacked and piled, while in the other they are kept at a respectful distance, displayed like gems.

Despite these differences, the Gracie Mansion Gallery and the Art Galaxy gallery have a great deal in common. They were among the first galleries to open in the Lower East Side and on the fringes of SoHo, where dozens of art galleries have started in the past five years.

Today, they have found success, and the stories of their early years tell much about the business of dealing in contemporary art in New York City — a field that even insiders call highly competitive and confusingly complex.

The Same Beginnings

Both stories begin the same way: A young woman has dreams of starting a gallery, but has no experience or financial backing. Working at a paying job for part of each week, she gets the enterprise going with a high-octane mix of energy, patience, the help of friends and the lucky discovery of a cheap space to rent.

The Gracie Mansion Gallery is now a phenomenon, perhaps the most successful of the art galleries on the Lower East Side. On weekends, it becomes a kind of Bloomingdale's of art, with collectors visiting in droves to purchase the newest work of the gallery's 15 regular artists.

The gallery is run by a woman named, yes, Gracie Mansion. A self-professed workaholic with a taste for outlandish jewelry (Gumby earrings are her trademark), she is a publicity-magnet, an impresario whose exhibitions have catchy titles and whose artists often deal with pop cultural themes.

The Art Galaxy Gallery, by contrast, is a quiet place in Little Italy, far off the art-shopping trails of SoHo and the Lower East Side. The gallery's small but exquisite exhibitions tackle big subjects — man-and-nature is a consistent theme. But only a handful of works have sold at Art Galaxy in five years. The gallery survives on private gifts and grants, and measures its success in critical reviews in art magazines, and in quiet but growing talk among art world insiders about the quality of its shows.

Barbara Flynn, the Art Galaxy's founder, is a soft-spoken and earnest woman with a scholarly approach to her work. With a Yale University degree in art history and two years experience as an apprentice archivist

and curator in two German art museums, Miss Flynn now scrutinizes the work of dozens of artists — sometimes doing library research to confirm her initial opinions.

Yet Miss Flynn also mixes hard-edged ambition with her scholarship. She took up dealing art, in fact, out of her impatience with art history doctoral studies at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

"It didn't sit right with me," she said. "I wanted to do something more active, perhaps even useful. I wanted to be able to act on something quickly if I liked the work of an artist. I got the idea that I could make a living running an art gallery, so it was a practical decision, in part. But it was also mysterious, because I had never worked in a gallery and had no idea how to run one."

The chance discovery of an empty first-floor room, near her apartment building, sparked Miss Flynn's future career. Upon seeing the space, which was available at a bargain rent, she envisioned it as a gallery filled with art of her choosing, and with herself sitting at a corner desk. Impulsively, she rented the room and quit school.

With a lawyer friend, she established the gallery as a not-for-profit, tax exempt corporation. Under this arrangement, benefactors can deduct donations to the gallery, while the sales of art are allowed as long as they do not exceed the donations. Contributions from friends got the gallery going in the early months. With similar gifts, foundation grants and a two-day-a-week job at a more established gallery, Miss Flynn keeps the Art Galaxy afloat.

40 Shows in Four Years

In her first four years, Miss Flynn has mounted 40 shows, some of which included works by prominent New York artists, including Bill Jensen, Elizabeth Murray and Milton Resnick. She specializes, however, in first shows for young artists, in art by mature artists whose work Miss Flynn feels is under-recognized, and in one-time-only installations often connected with avant-garde performance art.

The Gracie Mansion Gallery, by contrast, seems itself like a piece of performance art — its very name generates interest and displays its owner's calculating showmanship. Born Joanne Mayhew Young, Miss Mansion changed her name in 1981, two years before opening her gallery.

"I wanted a name that was actually a thing, like Tommy Gun," she said. "I considered Selma Alabama and Andrea Doria, but picked Gracie Mansion because it seemed so New York. When I first heard it, I knew immediately that it was the right one."

Miss Mansion, originally an artist, moved to New York from New Jersey

in 1979, hoping to establish a career. She settled in the Lower East Side, the only New York neighborhood she could afford, and quickly met many other artists. "All my friends," she said, "were great artists who couldn't get into SoHo" galleries.

Her determination to set this right steered Miss Mansion toward her new career. She declared her bathroom an art gallery and sent out press announcements that read: "Gracie Mansion proudly announces the opening of her new gallery, Gracie Mansion, Loo Division, at 432 East Ninth Street, Suite 5."

The show was a hit. An artist friend, Timothy Greathouse, donated small photographs for the show. Miss Mansion's other artist friends came, as did a newspaper reporter. Two further Loo Division shows were increasingly popular; the second attracted 500 visitors one evening, and the building superintendent decreed that the shows could not continue.

First Permanent Gallery

By that time, however, some works had been sold, a cash flow was started, and Miss Mansion was on her way. She obtained her first permanent gallery space, on 10th Street near Avenue B, with \$6,000 donated by a young lawyer, James Stark, who promised to buy enough art each month to pay the \$550 rent. But the gallery — boosted by its location near other galleries that it itself had helped to attract to the area — was a quick success, and Mr. Stark's offer was unnecessary.

Certainly, the economics of starting a gallery in the Lower East Side (the Gracie Mansion Gallery recently moved to 167 Avenue A) or Little Italy (the Art Galaxy gallery is at 262 Mott Street) had much to do with the galleries' successes. Their initial rents were \$550 and \$350 a month, respectively, while rents for SoHo gallery spaces, three years ago, were commonly at \$4,000 a month, and on 57th Street, \$6,000 a month or higher.

At the Gracie Mansion Gallery, sales have always been brisk and have played a large part in the gallery's success. Prices were in the \$100 to \$1,200 range three years ago, while large works now bring up to \$20,000. At the Art Galaxy, where sales are infrequent (with prices ranging from \$600 to \$7,000), the income from sales has not figured in nearly as much.

Behind the economics, though, inevitably stand the dealers' personal styles. Gracie Mansion's personality, eye for quality and business sense brought artists, collectors and publicity-makers together.

Barbara Flynn, on the other hand, has created for herself a different kind of success — the slow building of a reputation within the art world — through her year-in, year-out emphasis on high-quality shows.